

Fabulous Farm Shows

Visit a farm show: Come discover what rural America has to offer.

by Carol Ekarius

About the Author

Carol Ekarius and her husband, photographer Ken Woodard, hobby ranch in Colorado. She is the author of several books, including *Small-Scale Livestock Farming* (Storey Books), and is a contributing editor to HF. Looking for a new piece of equipment? Seeking some information on new crops? Just looking for a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon? Then visit a farm show, where dealers display their wares and university researchers share information.

A childhood memory: Every year my dad would pack the family in the car, and we'd head off to the city for a day at the annual boat show. My dad would study the latest sport-fishing boats from manufacturers like Bertram or Hatteras; my brother and I would stare with glazed eyes at the speedboats and dream of having our own Donzi or Boston Whaler. We'd all come home with a passel of glossy brochures and a stomach ache from all the sweet and spicy treats we gobbled at the show.

Rural America has its own version of these events in the farm show: Sprinkled throughout the country, farm shows give manufacturers and dealers a chance to show off their latest line of farm equipment, and ag researchers a chance to update their community about the latest innovations from university research programs. Audiences are often comprised of entire families, so farm-show managers schedule programs, like "The Imagination Station," which features activities for kids (the insect petting zoo is my favorite), or "The Cut Flower Center," that offers information on growing, selling and just enjoying cut flowers. Larger shows often include entertainment—ranging from cowboy poetry to tractor pulls—and many include exhibitions of antique farm equipment and historic farm life.

FARM SHOWS: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

"Farm shows have been a functional aspect of the agricultural landscape since the 1800s," says Craig Fendrick, executive coordinator of the North American Farm Show Council, "though in their early period, they were strictly associated with county and state fairs. But during the 1950s and 60s, county and state fairs began trying to attract a nonagricultural audience with rides and concerts, so there was an evolution to separate agricultural field days. These field days continued to evolve to the farm shows as we now know them, and they are still evolving."

For example, "Ag Progress Days began in the late 1950s as a traveling show that moved around Pennsylvania demonstrating haying equipment and techniques," explains Bob Oberheim, manager of Ag Progress Days at Pennsylvania State University. "In 1976, the show found a permanent home at Penn State, and today we host about 50,000 visitors each August, and have over 350 vendors on site."

Ag Progress Days is one of the larger events (some are still very small with a few local dealers displaying their wares at a county fair or other community event), but Fendrick emphasizes, "We avoid using the 'st' words (biggest, largest, most) to describe any of the 125+, large-scale shows held around the country each year, because it is really hard to determine who would wear the banner. One show might have more floor space, another more vendors; some shows are free, so attendance figures are just an estimate that could be off by 10 or 20 percent."

Farm shows are designed to meet the needs of a wide variety of producers across a range of disciplines. The National Farm Machinery Show, held each February at the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center in Louisville, Ky., is one of the larger indoor shows in America, hosting close to 1,000 vendors and over 300,000 visitors, is a good example of this category. Other shows are geared toward particular crops, like the Georgia Peanut Show & Conference, or livestock species, such as the World Dairy Expo.

Traditionally, farm shows were aimed at large-scale, commercial farmers. They displayed "big iron"—tractors with tires taller than a man and combines the size of a house. Although vendors at farm shows still place a great deal of emphasis on the big-iron market, they recognize the changing demographics of rural America (the number of farms dropped nationwide in the last agricultural census-1997—but there was significant growth in the number of small farms—or those under 179 acres). To meet the needs of these small farmers, vendors are displaying a variety of equipment suited to the

unique needs of small, diversified operations, and show managers are scheduling demonstrations and workshops on topics like composting and vegetable marketing, or establishing “driving ranges” that allow people to test drive skid-steer loaders or estate tractors.

AG PROGRESS DAYS

Rock Springs, Penn., is home to Ag Progress Days. Located in south-central Pennsylvania, just several miles from Penn State’s main campus, Rock Springs blossoms into a small city for three days in mid-August when the university’s outlying agricultural campus hosts Ag Progress Days.

Over the years, the program aspect of Ag Progress Days has developed into a major emphasis. The 2002 theme for the College of Agriculture’s building was “Discover Your Future Today.” Aimed at prospective students, the program highlighted a variety of career options in agriculture. Alumni presented seminars throughout the day and interactive displays were always available.

Entertainment is a must for any family-oriented event. Sessions held in the College Exhibits theatre by master-storyteller Jan Kinney, engaged audiences with traditional tales, in addition to a special hands-on museum display from the Pasto Agricultural Museum entitled “Early Farm and Home Pork Processing and Preservation.” The “A-Maze-N Corn Field” maze (accessible by wheelchair and baby strollers) was great fun for young and old alike.

Horse lovers have become a major audience at farm shows, and Ag Progress Days has responded with a building dedicated to “The Equine Experience,” supported by Penn State, the Pennsylvania Quarter Horse Association and the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA). The building gives visitors a chance to learn from veterinarians, extension specialists and equestrian clinicians from around Pennsylvania.

For the working farmers, workshops included a daily “Graziers Forum,” nutrient management workshops and tours of university research plots and area farms. A popular tour was of the university’s High Tunnel Vegetable Production research plot, which gave folks a chance to see vegetables, small fruits and cut flowers being grown in plastic tunnels. By using the tunnels, farmers can produce crops year round. A regular cycle of field machinery and farm safety demonstrations takes place during the show, giving farmers a chance to see the latest and best production agriculture technology in action.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

For the small-scale farmer, visiting a farm show is a great way to learn about new tools and technologies or to shop for new equipment. Each show reflects the character of agriculture in the region where it is located: In the south you may learn about the latest precision agriculture tools for cotton; in Ohio you might learn about operating a small-scale blueberry farm; and in Pennsylvania, you’ll see dairy equipment (and lots of ice cream for sale). Most manufacturers now display a wide variety of equipment that’s designed with smaller landowners and part-time farmers in mind.

Steven Wiedmier, president of Tigerco Distribution, has been attending farm shows for more than 20 years, and has seen this change firsthand. “There are more small farms out there, and we’re doing our best to meet their demands. This market is willing to pay a little more for the right piece of equipment, but they want it to be low maintenance and user-friendly.

Wiedmier has also noticed an increase in attendance at night and on weekends. “When we started doing shows, few had evening hours, and if they did, there wasn’t much of a crowd. Now, most farmers work off the farm, so we’ve seen lots of folks flock in to shows after work.”

According to Wiedmier, the Aitchison Mini-Seed Drill is a good example of the type of equipment he now represents that fits the small- and hobby-farm marketplace. “This is a unique seed drill that’s sized to pull behind a small tractor or a four-wheeler,” he explains. “It feeds seed using a sponge mechanism that was originally developed by the pharmaceutical industry for sorting pills, so it can adjust for any size seed and any seeding rate without having special attachments. It’s also designed to create a little cavern around the seed that helps collect and maintain moisture, so seed germinates more quickly.”

The equipment suited for small farms includes not only seed drills, but manure spreaders, haying equipment, tractor-mounted fencing tools, and the author’s favorite—“The Groundhog” by Concord Environmental Equipment. The Groundhog is a handy, “electric over hydraulic” loader attachment with a lift capacity of 300 pounds and 45 inches off the ground that’s designed to fit on a four-wheel ATV or utility vehicle. The available attachments include dump buckets, blades or prongs for forklift functions. To this hobby farmer, it looks like the perfect tool for handling manure, grading driveways, plowing snow or hauling firewood. What more could the small farmer want?

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